

Towards a Social Psychology of Cynicism

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Abstract

Cynicism is the attitude that people are primarily motivated by self-interest. It tracks numerous negative outcomes, and yet many people are cynical. To understand this “cynicism paradox,” we review and call for more social psychological work on how cynicism spreads, with implications for how we might slow it down.

The Cynicism Paradox

Out of almost 8,000 respondents from 41 countries, many agree that “powerful people tend to exploit others” or that “kind-hearted people usually suffer losses” [1]. This indicates widespread *cynicism*, the attitude that people are primarily motivated by self-interest, often accompanied by emotions such as contempt, anger, and distress, and antagonistic interactions with others [2]. What explains such cynicism? Perhaps it reflects a realistic perception of the suffering caused by human self-interest. But work in social psychology regularly demonstrates that attitudes are not always perfect mirrors of reality. We will argue that people often overestimate self-interest, create it through their expectations, or overstate their own to not appear naïve. Cynicism rises when people witness self-interest, but social psychology – so far relatively quiet on the topic – can explain why they get trapped in this worldview even when it stops tracking reality.

Cynicism is related, but not reducible to, a lack of trust. Trust is often defined as accepting vulnerability based on positive expectations of others. *Generalized* trust implies a general tendency to have positive expectations of others, and shares with cynicism the tendency to judge the character of a whole group of people. But cynicism is more than reduced positive expectations. It entails a strongly negative view of human nature. The intensity of cynicism’s hostility further differentiates it from mere generalized distrust. Finally, while people can trust and distrust others’ competence, integrity, and predictability, cynicism usually focuses on judgments of moral character. This differentiates cynicism from mere pessimism, which encompasses any negative beliefs about the future, moral or non-moral alike.

Cynics can differ in whose character they judge (see **Table 1** for a taxonomy of cynicism). Some attribute self-interest to only a specific group of people (“group cynicism”). Democrats and

Republicans might view each other cynically but see their own group as cooperative and kind. Other cynics attribute self-interest to institutions (“institutional cynicism”). People might be cynical about the press but not their neighbors. Finally, some cynics believe that people generally are self-interested (“general cynicism”).

Cynicism tracks various negative life outcomes. Cynics are at higher risk for heart disease, ulcers, dementia, and diabetes, and even have higher mortality rates [3]. Cynics act in ways that limit social connection, e.g., acting less prosocially than non-cynics and failing to seek reconnection when isolated [4]. They also benefit less from the connections they do have. For instance, social support usually buffers the negative effects of stress, but less so for cynics, who remain stressed even in the presence of supportive others [5].

Cynicism disrupts people’s health and relationships, and yet many people seem to be cynical. We call this the *cynicism paradox*.

Explaining the Cynicism Paradox

Academic disciplines offer varying explanations for the cynicism paradox. Communication scholars show that exposure to “fake news” during the 2018 US midterm elections predicted cynicism about the political system on election day [6]. Sociologists find that continued police scandals predict cynicism about law enforcement in racially isolated neighborhoods [7]. Organizational researchers document that workers become cynical when they believe their organization over-promises and under-delivers [8].

These examples highlight “macro” forces that spread cynicism through broad events external to any one individual. However, there are also internal “micro” forces that make individuals susceptible to cynical thinking. Psychology offers opportunities to understand the cynicism paradox at this level of analysis.

Most psychological research on cynicism takes a personality perspective. For instance, “cynical hostility,” derived from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, classifies people as cynical when they agree with items such as “I think most people would lie to get ahead.”

This personality perspective has linked cynicism to negative life outcomes, as discussed above. It helps us understand one half of the paradox—the deleterious effects of cynicism. But it does less to clarify the other half: cynicism is not fixed and can be more pronounced in some contexts and groups than others. Social psychology is uniquely positioned to bridge macro- and micro-level models of cynicism by clarifying how perceived contexts might foster cynicism within and across individuals.

The social psychology of cynicism remains nascent, but here we briefly highlight contributions it has made to revealing how cynicism spreads at three levels of analysis: interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup.

Interpersonal level

On an *interpersonal level*, social psychologists have long examined self-fulfilling prophecies, where initially false beliefs become true over time. Much previous work has examined if high expectations of another's competence actually make the other person more competent. Just like expectations about competence, cynical expectations of moral character can become self-fulfilling.

Economic games have revealed that when one person treats another cynically, that second person can *become* more selfish. In a recent study, receivers in a trust game are made to feel distrusted. This actually makes them more untrustworthy [9]. Field work has also documented such effects. In one study, federal supervisors look at compliance in Australian nursing homes with standards of quality of care. Ironically, when cynical supervisors expect low compliance and tighten supervision, they actually lower compliance [10].

More generally, cynics assume the worst in others and, accordingly, treat them with less respect. A recent paper uses lab experiments and daily diary methods to show that cynics often disrespect others. Since people dislike being disrespected, they often return the disrespect [11]. Self-fulfilling prophecies thus explain increases in cynicism by illustrating the ease with which cynics create environments that confirm their grim view of human nature. As cynics tend to treat others disrespectfully, those others might then be at risk of becoming cynical themselves.

Intragroup level

On an *intragroup level*, social psychologists have coined the term pluralistic ignorance, where members of a group privately reject a group norm while believing that other group members accept it. A group can succumb to the “norm of self-interest,” which specifies that people are and should be self-interested [12]. Members in such groups present themselves as more self-interested than they really are to avoid appearing naïve or deceptive.

In one study, participants anonymously oppose a proposal to take away money from NIH research. However, when some participants are told they have no vested interest in doing so, they are more likely to silence their opposition in public. The participants fear being judged by cynical others and become less likely to engage in social action that has no direct benefit to them [12]. As cynicism rises in a group, it can make non-cynics act in more self-interested ways – which further reinforces group members’ level of cynicism.

Intergroup level

On an *intergroup level*, social psychologists have started investigating false meta-perceptions, where one group holds inaccurate and overly hostile beliefs about another. In at least 25 countries, people perceive their outgroup to be more extreme than it actually is [13]. These polarizing perceptions can become self-fulfilling as groups react with extreme measures to the distorted picture they have painted of the outgroup.

A 2022 paper shows how perceived polarization undermines outgroup trust [14]. People see the outgroup move away further and further from cherished ingroup values and come to see outgroup members as less trustworthy. This group cynicism further erodes people’s willingness to cooperate or even communicate across groups, and can escalate intergroup hostility. False meta-perceptions illustrate how people can become more cynical in part because they overestimate how polarized their fellow citizens are.

Resolving the Cynicism Paradox

Several disciplines demonstrate how external events might increase cynicism. However, social psychology demonstrates how cynicism is not always perfectly calibrated to one's external environment.

We call for more social psychological research on cynicism, both to continue exploring its roots, and—eventually—to explore ways we might resolve the cynicism paradox (see **Table 2**). Of course, trust should not be blindly extended to everyone in every context. But the following potential interventions might help reduce unwarranted cynicism.

On an interpersonal level, cynics might learn how their unconditional distrust of others brings out the very self-interest it predicts. Cynics might see that their initial trust can likewise be self-fulfilling: people appreciate being trusted and become less self-interested in turn [9]. More generally, cynics do not have to reflexively act on their first impression of another's trustworthiness. Instead, they might decide to give others the benefit of a doubt more often, at least at first.

On an intragroup level, groups might change their norms towards trust. The pluralistic ignorance work shows that people often follow group norms despite contrasting personal beliefs. Just as non-cynics can behave cynically under a norm of self-interest, so can cynics become more trusting when they feel normative pressure to do so [15]. Such norm manipulations might complement interventions that aim to change people's actual expectations about how trustworthy others are, as discussed below.

On an intergroup level, groups might learn that they see the outgroup as more self-interested than it actually is. When people learn how exaggerated their outgroup beliefs are, their beliefs become less extreme [13]. Once people understand that others are less hostile than they thought, it might be easier to trust them.

To reduce the detrimental effects of cynicism, it is crucial to understand cynicism's contagious nature. With the power of social psychology, such an understanding might be possible.

Table 1. A Taxonomy of Cynicism

	Group Cynicism	Institutional Cynicism	General Cynicism
Definition	People <u>of a certain group</u> are seen as motivated primarily by self-interest	People <u>of a certain institution</u> are seen as motivated primarily by self-interest	People <u>in general</u> are seen as motivated primarily by self-interest
Example 1: A young colleague betrays an older one in a team project. What does the older colleague conclude?	“Young people are self-interested.”	“People in this workplace are self-interested.”	“People are self-interested.”
Example 2: The news show an outgroup politician making a hypocritical comment. What does the news recipient conclude?	“Democrats/Republicans are self-interested.”	“Politicians are self-interested.”	“People are self-interested.”

Table 2. How Social Psychology Might Resolve the Cynicism Paradox

Level of Analysis	Mechanism Enabling Cynicism's Contagion	Potential Resolution	Example
Interpersonal	Self-fulfilling prophecies: cynical individuals can make others more self-interested.	Just as cynicism can make others more self-interested, trust can make others less self-interested	When people feel that another person trusted them, they become more trustworthy. They give more money to that person, and also trust a complete stranger more [9].
Intragroup	Pluralistic ignorance: a group can act cynically even if its members are not actually cynical.	Change group norms to reward trust	When people feel normative pressure to give others the benefit of a doubt, they decide to trust more than their cynicism would warrant [15].
Intergroup	False meta-perceptions: a group can misperceive an outgroup to be more hostile than it is.	Correct false meta-perceptions	Thousands of participants from across the world see accurate information about an outgroup. This corrects their overly hostile views of the outgroup [13].

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